

The Boss Snake of Murphy's Pond

Tony Gerard

Murphy's Pond, located in Hickman County, Kentucky, is the largest area of cypress swamp remaining in western Kentucky. Currently the area is part of the Obion Creek Nature Preserve, but the actual area of the pond itself is owned and administered by Murray State University. Only a small part of the area is actually open water; most is a mosaic of cypress swamp and lowland floodplain forest. Obion Creek runs nearby.

The area is home to many distinctly southern species. It allegedly has one of the highest cottonmouth population densities in the United States. All my life I have heard that a small alligator was killed on the road nearby the pond in the 1960s, but I could find no confirmation of this story in an internet search.

A story from my family's folklore involved a big snake killed in the Murphy's Pond area. In 1950 or '51 a group of my relatives were sitting in the yard on a summer afternoon. A cousin arrived and said that a large snake had been killed and brought out of Murphy's Pond and they should go see it. Of that group only my mother, Vanda (Oliver) Gerard, and my aunt Sue (Oliver) Fite are still living. They were about 14 and 12 years old at the time. The group traveled down highway 307 to a sawmill that was "right across from the entrance to Murphy's Pond."

The dead snake was laid out on a big log; its head and tail hung off either end. The story was that the night before, as the last logging truck was leaving the area with a load, it hit a bump. When someone went into the road the next day they found the snake dead in the logging road. Both my mother and aunt recall the marks of the truck tires being clearly visible on the dead snake about mid body.

My mother recalls the snake being between 12 and 15 feet long. My aunt thought it was larger. She noted "I thought they said the log was 30

feet long”. Both agree that the snake was a dark gray color, described as charcoal gray by my aunt. My mother recalls the snake as having distinct black spots about 3 or 4 inches across, my Aunt recall it as more mottled or “swirly” patterned in black. Both agree that the snake’s body midlength was at least as “big as a big coffee can (approximately 8-9 inches) or bigger” with a head proportional in size.

I posted inquiries on several social media sites to try and find other witnesses. I was unsuccessful in finding any for that particular snake, but I did find a witness to a different big, dead snake in the area.

Cletus Murphy was attending Hickman County High School in Clinton in 1963 or ’64. One spring day, probably in May, a fellow brought an enormous dead snake to school to show the faculty and students. It was so unusual that the entire school, about 300 people, was allowed to go out to see the snake’s body a class at a time.

The snake was in the back of a pickup with sideboards. Its head was wired to one of the sideboards to be more visible. The snake’s body was in several curves within the truck bed. “If it had been straight it would have hung way over the tailgate,” he noted. He believes the snake was about 15 feet long. He described its head as “big as a large grapefruit” and its body as being perhaps 8-9 inches thick.

The snake’s ground color he describes as yellowish with distinct blocks or diamonds of a charcoal gray color. Murphy remembers the belly as also being yellowish, of a slightly lighter color than the back.

The gentleman had run it over on Highway 307, “down in the bottom before you get to Beulah Baptist Church.” The snake had not begun to decompose and Murphy believed the fellow may have killed it the day he brought it to the school.

So were there actually two unusually large snakes killed in the same area about a decade apart? The descriptions sounded like two different species, and there seemed to be a big time gap.

Cletus Murphy had recommended that I also contact Michael Farmer. He was a lifelong resident of the area and had grown up close to Murphy’s Pond. It was Mr. Farmer that actually tied the stories together.

Michael Farmer remembered the incident well. In his version of the story the snake was hit by a logging truck somewhere near Murphy’s Pond. “I heard the driver was coming out and hit a bump, but he thought he’d just hit a log that had fallen off another load. The next day they found the dead snake,” he related. “They drug it up to a sawmill that was on the east

side of the road, where 307 and 703 meet, and displayed it on a log there.” Sometimes later, “Mac Engram took it to town and showed it around.” For a time it was also displayed at a local gas station.

Farmer remembers the snake as being greenish brown in color with darker spots or blotches. He said he honestly didn’t remember if the darker spots were actual spots, blocks or swirls, only that the snake had a darker pattern on its back. He remembers the snake as “12 or 13 feet long and as big around as a man’s thigh. Its head was as big as a small hog.” Unlike Cletus Murphy he remembers the snake as beginning to decompose; “It was gettin’ pretty ripe!” He related that people came from all over to see the dead snake as word spread. He also added, “If there had been two big snakes killed I surely would have heard about them both,” as he lived in the area all his life.

So it seems that there was only one dead snake and my family’s recollection of the date was wrong. With so much notoriety surely someone took a picture! I contacted the local paper, the Hickman County Gazette, but they only had archives going back to the 1980s. I was unable to get in touch with anyone from the local historical society.

So what was this enormous snake? My mother seems certain that the snake she saw was an anaconda. Cletus Murphy felt the snake he saw was “some constrictor like a Python/Anaconda.”

I spoke with Dr. Edmund Zimmerer, a herpetologist retired from Murray State University. He felt that my mother’s description might not be far off for an anaconda two days dead in the summer. He also noted that Murphy’s Pond has springs that keep certain areas ice free all winter. Dr. Zimmerer felt that a tropical species overwintering there “was within the realm of possibility.”

So if it were an anaconda or python we are left with the question of how it got there. Such big constrictors were not nearly as available to the general public at the time as they would be in later years, but introduction seems the only option. Dr. Zimmerer notes that there were small “roadside zoos” in many parts of Kentucky in the ’50s and ’60s and that often when they closed or went out of business they simply released their animals. He told of a population of coachwhip snakes that had existed for several years in Kentucky that came about in just this manner. Further research many turn up an answer (or at least more witnesses).

Oh—and just for the record—Cletus Murphy and Michael Farmer had both also heard the alligator story!



A young reticulated python in the Philippines.

© Tony Gerard



Yellow anaconda
(CC-SA) Bernard Dupont

EDITOR'S NOTE

Tony's account is of particular interest to me, as I included a couple of giant snake stories in *Boss Snakes* (2008) from the same region in Kentucky. Tony describes what happened in Hickman County, KY, in 1963 or 1964. In 1962, Hazel, KY, in Calloway County, a large snake, thought to be up to 24 feet in length, was reportedly seen by several people. Calloway County is just two counties east of Hickman County, in the southwestern corner of the state. Only now can I offer a resolution, though, to the Calloway County big snake. From the Louisville, KY, *Courier Journal* of July 12, 1962:

SNAKE 18 FEET LONG CAUGHT NEAR HAZEL

Hazel, Ky., July 11.—A snake about 18 feet long was captured near here Wednesday and some say it may be the mysterious Hazel monster. But others say, no, there must be a bigger one around somewhere.

A six-man hunting party captured the giant reptile early Wednesday on a road and threw a blanket over its head.

The snake was not measured immediately, explained Police Chief W. O. Parker of nearby Murray.

The snake was taken Wednesday night to a reptile farm near Park City, Ky., which identified it as a nonpoisonous South American anaconda.

Diamonds On Side

Chief Parker described the snake as brown, with black diamonds down its side and a yellow belly.

“Folks have been out hunting the snake ever since that fellow saw that 28-foot one in his cornfield last month,” Parker said.

The fellow the chief was referring to is Hildred Paschall, a farmer who reported that he saw Wednesday’s catch and “it’s not the one.”

Despite scoffers, Paschall still stoutly stands by his claim to have taken a long look at a mammoth snake in his cornfield. Paschall said the one he saw stretched across eight corn rows, which would make it at least 21 feet long, and maybe as much as 30 feet.

I haven’t come across any further reports from Hazel, so if there was another exotic snake loose in the area, it most likely succumbed to the following winter’s temperatures. In any case, this report provides some context for Tony’s account. It would not be the first time an exotic big snake found its way into a rural landscape far from its native home.